

Stepping into the Future: A History of the Step by Step Program

by Sarah Klaus, Executive Director, International Step by Step Association, Budapest, Hungary *

The Step by Step Program, originally called the Soros Preschool Project, was envisioned as a two-year initiative to introduce child-centered teaching methods and family involvement in the early childhood education systems of fifteen countries in Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe. Ten years on, Step by Step has developed into the International Step by Step Association (ISSA), a network of 30 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) engaged in large-scale national reform and regional advocacy initiatives.

In 1993, Canadian physician Dr. Frasier Mustard met investor and philanthropist George Soros, founder of the Open Society Institute (OSI).¹ The purpose of the meeting was to discuss strategies for Soros' new regional university in Central Europe but, significantly, discussion soon turned to early childhood development. Mustard argued the case for the critical role of early childhood in the development of open societies so convincingly that

Soros later decided to invest \$100+ million to launch the new initiative.

The resulting scheme aimed to introduce child-centered preschool models and replicate these new approaches through existing government teacher training systems. This pilot project developed into ISSA, now an independent network of 30 national NGOs united in their vision to promote the right of each child to meet his or her full potential. Serving children from



1994

Original Step by Step Countries

Albania, Belarus, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Ukraine, Yugoslavia

Program Development

First six-week training and school visits in Washington, DC, for 15 countries and 30 participants.

Trainers conduct in-country training for teachers during the summer.

Network Development

All major training sessions are held in one location with the goal of building a strong professional network among participants across borders.

Participants begin sharing ideas and materials.

First annual meeting held in Budapest to plan for future.

Program Expansion

15 original countries

252 preschool classrooms open

1995

New Step by Step Countries

Kyrgyzstan, Slovenia

Program Development

Huge expansion in preschool classrooms in all countries. Contest to re-name the program. Macedonia wins with Step by Step (SbS).

Network Development

Training continues in regional settings for the new ECD network.

Annual meetings continue to support network development.

Program Expansion

17 countries active in network.

980 preschool classrooms in operation.

birth to the age of ten, ISSA implements a variety of innovative education reform projects, all based on child-centeredness and direct community engagement.

ISSA and its members have trained and mentored over 220,000 early childhood professionals and implemented programs that reach millions of young children and families across the 30 participating countries. ISSA has also assisted in extensive, influential policy reform.

As a consequence of its dual aim of promoting optimal development for all children and supporting establishment of a strong, active third sector in early childhood education, Step by Step has played a major role in early childhood education reform in Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe; Central Asia; Mongolia; and Haiti. It is also embarking on new initiatives in countries such as Argentina.

Core Principles of the Step by Step Program:

- Equal access to education and care opportunities
- Child-centered, individualized teaching and learning
- Development of skills for life-long learning and participation in a democracy
- Teachers as facilitators
- Parent involvement
- Community engagement in public education
- Culturally-appropriate learning environments and approaches
- Ongoing professional development

Step by Step has evolved dynamically. Initially a comprehensive initiative that included early education, medical, health, and social services, rapid expansion in the late 1990s led to the program re-focusing on early childhood education. Renovation and humanitarian assistance (such as food and medicine for preschools) were assigned to other donors and partners, while Step by Step concentrated its efforts almost exclusively on development of human capacity at all levels: Country Teams,² teacher trainers, school/preschool directors, parent advocates, teachers, children.

On its tenth anniversary, this article goes behind the scenes of the Step by Step Program, describing the milestones and key decisions that shaped its development and evaluating its challenges and successes.

Establishing Roots: the Core Principles of the Step by Step Program

To launch the project, staff of the Children & Youth Department of the Open Society Institute were tasked with designing a program. Elizabeth Lorant engaged experts involved in the US Head Start Program based at Georgetown University. The project planning team devised a program based on three criteria:

- Assessments of the current situation of children and early childhood education in the initial 15 participating countries³
- Experiences and research from the US's comprehensive Head Start Program
- OSI's emphasis on promotion of an active civil society

Initial country assessments revealed a regional decline in social services and infrastructure for young

children and their families. As economies plummeted, enterprises going through the painful process of privatization closed affiliated preschools.⁴ Basic maintenance funding for remaining childcare centers was eliminated. Soaring unemployment meant trained caregivers and social service workers lost their jobs. The entire structure of the social service system for families with young children was crumbling.

In this environment, it made sense to support children and families by strengthening services provided through the remaining preschools. These schools once formed the core of enviable systems of childcare that existed prior to the breakup of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and the velvet revolutions in Central Europe. The Soros Preschool Project (as it was still called) offered a model of integrated care for young children and their families, linking educational, medical, and social services. Like the Head Start model in the United States on which it was based, the project was designed to improve access for at-risk children.

The project focused on OSI's core mission, the strengthening of civil society, by introducing child-centered teaching methods and family and community engagement in early childhood programs. Teachers accustomed to delivering didactic instruction to the whole class would learn how to facilitate children's learning through play, to develop individual and small group instruction to meet the needs of each child, to promote choice and responsibility in the classroom, and to actively involve parents who had previously been excluded from the preschool education of their children.

Core program principles (see table, page 4) were incorporated into a methodology manual for teachers, prepared by the Georgetown University

team. The manual was adapted in each country and approved for implementation by national ministries.

A pilot experiment brought teams of early childhood educators to the United States for a six-week orientation and training visit. Selected pilot sites were provided with funds for renovation. They received furniture and educational materials for two classrooms and a parent room and funds to hire additional teaching assistants and a family coordinator. Funding was provided to replenish classroom supplies, initiate parent activities, and subsidize health or nutrition services.

In summer 1994, American trainers visited each country to assist the Country Teams in training preschool directors, family coordinators, teachers, teacher assistants, and other educational staff. In September 1994, 252 classrooms in public preschools opened their doors to welcome children and parents into child-centered learning environments. Little did we anticipate how active these parents would become!

Reacting to the Needs of Civil Society: Growing Step by Step

From the outset, the active engagement of parents in the preschool programs shaped the project's future. The original program strategy planned for replication after the project ended. It was envisaged that preschools would take on new roles as training centers, linking themselves with neighboring in-service training institutions. In reality, expansion plans were made within the first year, in response to requests of directors, teachers, and parents represented by Country Teams at their first meeting in December 1994.

When the Country Teams next met in September 1995, they reviewed new

1996

New Step by Step Countries

Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kazakhstan

Program Development

Based on its success, OSI extends two-year program to a five-year development plan.

Parents demand SbS primary school follow-up for children leaving preschool. OSI agrees and the Primary Initiative is launched.

Infant-Toddler program is launched.

The Higher Education Initiative is also launched to ensure systemic impact.

Network Development

Regional and national meetings continue to provide a forum for networking among countries.

Program Expansion

19 countries active in network.

1,367 kindergarten and primary classrooms in operation.

1997

New Step by Step Countries

Haiti, Latvia, South Africa

Program Development

Best preschools and primary schools become training centers to provide opportunities for trainees to observe classrooms. In addition, decentralization of training increases accessibility and affordability.

OSI mandates that SbS programs should become independent NGOs.

Network Development

Initiative from SbS teams to explore forming an international professional network for ECD at a SbS Higher Education conference at Keszthely, Hungary.

Program Expansion

22 countries active in network.

2,718 kindergarten and primary classrooms in operation.

96 training centers open. Student teachers begin to fulfill their practicum requirements in SbS classrooms.

Table 1: Step by Step Country Development Model

Support for	Program	Phase	Academic Years						
			1	2	3	4	5	6	
Schools <i>(At levels of local communities)</i>	Training	On-site training at schools	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
	Preschool <i>Grants to schools</i>	Demonstration Classrooms	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
		Expansion Classrooms	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
	Primary <i>Grants to schools</i>	Demonstration Classrooms	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
Expansion Classrooms		■	■	■	■	■	■	■	
Institutional Reform <i>(At level of National Institutions and Ministry)</i>	Teacher Training Institute Reform	Informal Links with Institutes	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
		Develop Model Training Classrooms	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
		Seminar for Institute Faculty	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
		Reform of Content & Methods	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
	Ministry Approval <i>Curriculum approved as official alternative</i>	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■

■ Soros Network Funds

■ Self-Sustaining without OSI-NY Funds

Program Replicates with Own Resources

demands from parents who wanted the project extended into primary schools in order to ensure continuity for their children. Despite the initial strong objections from staff at OSI—who were wary of introducing reforms that might inadvertently diminish the notoriously strong student test scores in primary schools in the region—plans to begin an extensive initiative in primary schools were launched.

At this point the new name Step by Step was adopted to express the continuity of the program and its staged approach to educational reform. A primary methodology and accompanying training manual were developed. Staff with expertise in primary education were hired in each country and sent to the United States for two weeks of training and school visits. In September 1996, 179 first grade classrooms opened in primary schools located near the pilot preschools. In the ensuing years, the project provided training for teachers in classrooms through grade 4.

In 1996 the strategy for Step by Step was re-defined according to a five-year development plan (see **Table 1**).

As a result of embarking on new initiatives to meet needs expressed by parents and the educational community, Step by Step now encompasses a diverse array of areas (see **Table 2**). This includes intensive efforts to improve school success for Roma children in Central and Eastern Europe, to reform teacher training systems, to promote mainstreaming of children with disabilities in regular classrooms, and to diversify early childhood development programming.

The number of these initiatives is impressive but has become overwhelming. The modification of the original concept has stretched the program scope almost beyond capacity. Consequently, Step by Step Country Teams tend to focus on select initiatives in their countries.

A Strategic Shift: Focusing on the Third Sector (NGOs) in Early Childhood

A new problem emerged in 1997. It began to seem unwise to turn over a quality-focused initiative to a ministry for safekeeping in a region with strong centralized ministries, eco-

Table 2

ISSA Initiatives	
<p>Within the context of child-centered learning and family participation, ISSA supports a wide range of programs. When implemented together, these initiatives provide a comprehensive foundation for reform of education and care for children from birth through age 10. Programs can also be implemented individually.</p> 	<p>Early Childhood (birth to age 6)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent Education Programs • Early Childhood Development Community Centers • Preschool • Center-based Infant and Toddler programs
	<p>Primary School</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grades 1–4 • Creating Democratic Schools (School Improvement) • Community Education • Transition to Middle School
	<p>Equal Access</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education for Social Justice • Inclusive Education • Roma and Minority Education
	<p>Teacher Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Courses for Teacher Training/Re-training Institutions • Student Practica • Training for Adult Trainers • Teacher Certification
	<p>Civic Participation in Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent Advocacy • Educational Non-Governmental Organizations
	<p>Professional Standards and Assessment Instruments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program and Teacher Standards • Trainer Standards • Preschool and Primary Observation and Assessment Instruments

conomic uncertainty, unstable governments, and a highly politicized education sector. There was a frequent turnover of ministry officials and school principals. Quality safeguards, in the form of strong independent professional and parent associations, NGOs, and educational foundations, were missing. To address this, in 1998 OSI began a process of “spinning off” the Step by Step Country Teams from within the National Soros Foundations. Sustainability now depended on the ability of the Country Teams to take on the challenge of establishing NGOs in countries with no history of permitting a strong third sector.

In 1998 OSI embarked on an inten-

sive project to train and support Country Teams as they made this remarkable transformation. Staff participated in seminars on new topics such as facilitative leadership, strategic planning, financial management, governance, public relations, and proposal writing. Each team was required to develop a three-year strategic plan for their new NGO, upon which future funding from OSI was based. Mentors were sent to each country to assist with this process. As a result, 27 of the 30 Step by Step Programs are now operated by independent early childhood organizations. These organizations form the bedrock of a growing third sector, which engages in

1998

New Step by Step Countries

Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Mongolia

Program Development

NGO management training is provided and SbS teams begin the process of registering as independent NGOs. OSI requires business plans before offering long-term support. Bosnia is first to be accepted.

USAID sponsors evaluations of SbS programs in four countries.

Network Development

Task force is established to work out details of the new association. International Step by Step Association (ISSA) is established in October 1998 at a Founding Assembly in Dubrovnik, Croatia.

Program Expansion

26 countries active in network.

7,656 kindergarten and primary classrooms in operation.

188 training centers in operation.

1999

New Step by Step Countries

Montenegro's and Kosovo's programs become independent of the Yugoslav project and the Yugoslav project is renamed Serbia

Program Development

SbS Programs become independent.

New Initiatives:

- Inclusion of children with special needs;
- Parent advocacy;
- Roma Special Schools Initiative.

Due to heavy demand, expansion is too much, too fast — concern about maintaining high quality emerges.

Network Development

ISSA is legally established and registered in the Netherlands in March 1999.

First ISSA Board establishes initial strategy and operating procedures.

ISSA Standards Task Force is established to ensure high quality of program.

First annual ISSA conference is held in Visegrad, Hungary, with a focus on family involvement.

Program Expansion

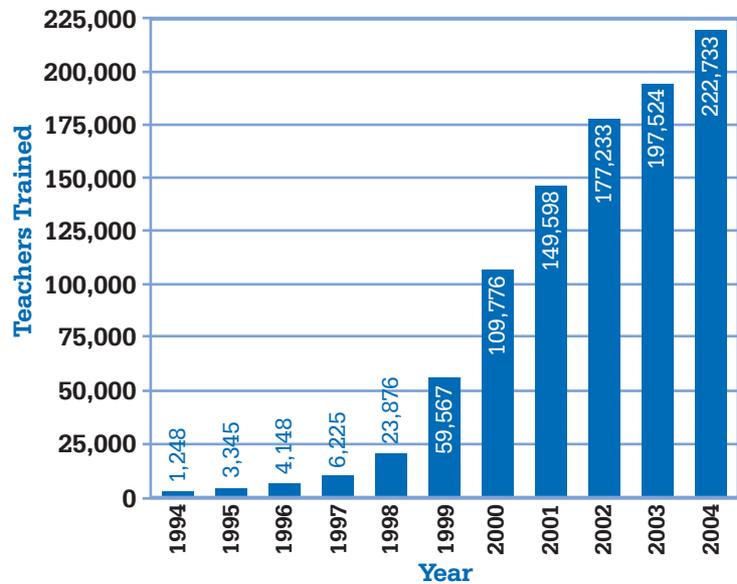
28 countries active in network.

23,902 kindergarten and primary classrooms in operation.

256 training centers in operation.

Teachers Trained

The capacity to reach and train an increasing number of teachers has been facilitated by partnerships with pedagogical universities in the Step by Step countries, and also by the establishment of 328 community-based training sites, with approval or accreditation from the local Ministry of Education.



advocacy and provides competitive, high quality educational services to communities, governments, and donor organizations.

Growing Together: the International Step by Step Association

The development of a strong personal and professional network helped nurture and sustain the program. The initial challenge to open the program in pilot preschools in September 1994 was immense. Annual meetings became a valuable forum for knowledge-sharing, where expert teams exchanged and analyzed experiences, personal stories, and advice.

In the summer of 1997 a group of higher education professors attending a Step by Step summer workshop in Keszthely, Hungary, requested the formalization of this growing informal network. Inspired by these meetings, they proposed the establishment of a regional association of professionals interested in child-centered methodologies. This call was taken up by the leaders of the Step by Step Country Programs and OSI in 1998. A permanent structure was required to support the new national NGOs and to provide a regional voice for professionals pro-

moting child-centered approaches. OSI supported the self-organization of the network.⁵ In October 1998 the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) was formally established at a Founding Assembly in Dubrovnik, Croatia. To increase opportunities for European Union co-operation, ISSA was registered in the Netherlands.

For the first three years ISSA operated from the OSI New York office, with Step by Step staff managing general coordination activities. Priority was placed on setting up basic administrative functions and on establishing the identity of the organization, but expectations from the members were very high, and proposals for diverse initiatives proliferated.

ISSA's national members believed that ISSA could attract international funding for national programs, replacing OSI as the main donor for the Step by Step Program. To achieve this, a full-time staff and independent office was required.

In 2001 ISSA's Board developed a strategic business plan for 2002-2005 to develop ISSA as an advocacy entity to promote child-centered, community-based early childhood programming internationally. A Network Division was set up to facilitate information

sharing (events, journals, websites, conferences) within the network and with international early childhood experts. A Program Division was established to develop existing Step by Step initiatives and to extend the program to new, interested countries. With the new plan in place, in 2002 ISSA hired full-time staff and set up an operational office in Budapest.

Today, ISSA is the primary networking organization for early childhood education in Central Eastern Europe. ISSA attracts members worldwide from over 42 countries.

Ensuring Quality Programming

One of ISSA's first activities was to launch, in 1999, the ISSA Early Childhood Quality Initiative, aimed at promoting ongoing professional development and recognizing excellence in early childhood teaching. A task force of experts from 11 countries developed

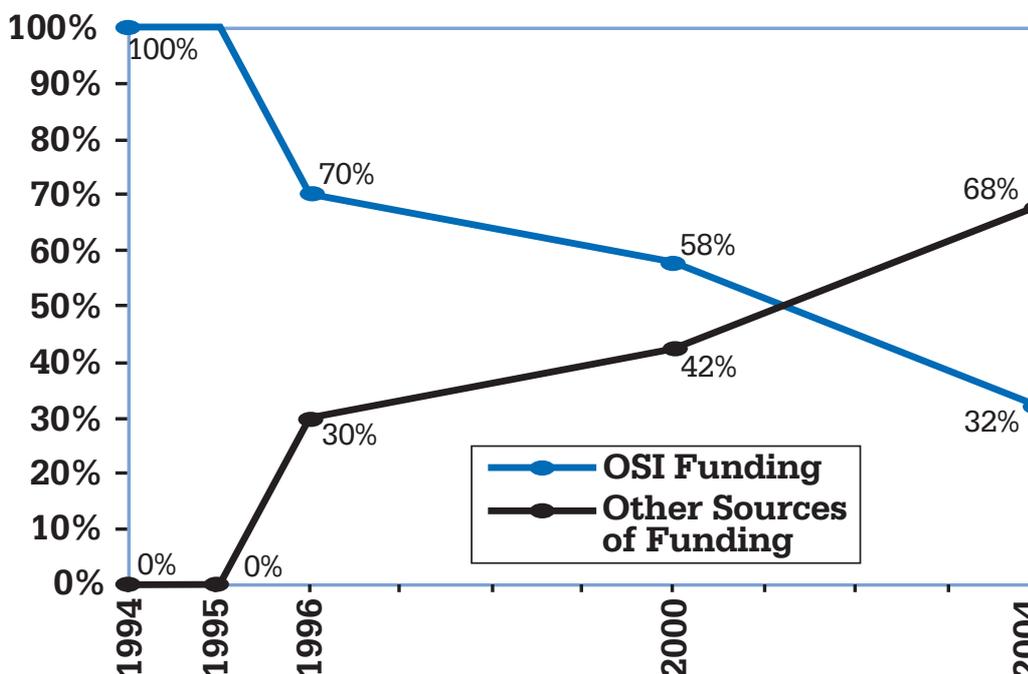
standards that could be used to ensure quality in the scale-up of country programs. The resulting publication, *Step by Step Program and Teacher Standards for Preschool and Primary Grades (2002)*, defined standards and indicators now used throughout ISSA's multi-national network. They provide a common framework for teachers to develop and measure professional growth with the support of trained mentors.

Development of the core standards and indicators was a challenging two-year process. Initial training modules for mentors and certifiers were scrapped after the first attempts failed to meet participants' needs. Training and manuals for certifiers, mentors, and teachers were rewritten and carefully trial-tested. Full-scale implementation began in earnest in the course of 2004.

We learned that establishing teaching standards is, in essence, political and that process is as impor-

Financial Support

As the programs became independent NGOs, they found multiple alternative sources of funding from local governments and other international organizations, which made it possible to maintain the robust growth and quality of the program.



2000

New Step by Step Countries

Program Development

Program in South Africa closes.

SbS students graduating to middle school— parents want services to continue in middle school.

Transition training for middle schools, and cooperation with OSI's Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking Program, designed for upper grades, begins.

Network Development

ISSA professional journal, *Educating Children for Democracy*, is published.

Second annual ISSA conference is held in Bled, Slovenia — "International Step by Step Association: Past, Present, Future."

Program Expansion

27 countries active in network.

14,596 kindergarten and primary classrooms in operation.

277 training centers in operation.

2001

New Step by Step Countries

Program Development

Roma Special Schools Initiative presents results of three-year project to Ministries of Education of six countries.

Initiative to launch web-based children's literature for SbS members, exchanging stories across borders.

Network Development

ISSA five-year strategic plan is presented to George Soros and accepted.

ISSA publishes Step by Step Program and Teacher Standards to provide a framework for program quality.

Third annual ISSA conference is held in Riga, Latvia — "Educating Children for Democracy: Our Future, Our Challenge."

New countries joining are assisted by other network countries. For example, Albania and Slovenia mentor Kosovo, Ukraine mentors Azerbaijan, and Bulgaria mentors Georgia.

Program Expansion

27 countries active in network.

16,500 kindergarten and primary classrooms in operation.

322 training centers in operation.



Step by Step Country Directors and U.S. Technical Assistance Team, Budapest, June 2002

tant as outcome. ISSA's standards, developed by experts from countries transitioning to open societies, place great emphasis on teaching that supports the new freedoms and responsibilities. Standards emphasize children's independence, initiative, and creativity; teacher facilitation; and parent participation. When the initial implementation demonstrated a shortcoming in measuring teacher performance in addressing issues of diversity in the classroom, a new standard was added requiring teachers to seek opportunities to open the minds and hearts of students to the cultures in their community.

There was a debate over how much flexibility to allow countries in adapting the standards instrument to national contexts. A compromise solution allowed countries to add contextual examples without changing key indicators.

Working Together: Our Partners

When the Step by Step Program was launched in 1994, few organizations were active in early childhood in Central and Eastern

Europe. OSI and Georgetown University staff who visited the region after the political changes in the early 1990's, were among the first foreigners to meet with preschool experts at Ministries of Education. Ministries, local governments, communities, parents, and children formed the primary partnerships in implementing the national programs. By 1996 they provided 30 percent of in-country funding. In these early days, it was critical that staff were able to count on multiyear funding commitments from the OSI, allowing national programs to focus on quality, rather than fundraising.

The establishment of national NGO early childhood organizations and ISSA reflected a new partnership strategy. Step by Step teams received training in how to approach partners and develop joint projects and proposals. Programs began to seek co-funding from national and international partners. Initially, programs succeeded in attracting modest funding, but large-scale partnerships with the World Bank, USAID, UNICEF, European Union PHARE and TACIS Programs soon followed. By 2002 partner organizations provided over 50 percent of the financial support for the Step by Step

Program, rising to almost 70 percent by 2003.

Partnership has inevitably influenced programming. Unfortunately, most of the major donors in the region have shown strong preference for funding education programs at the primary level and up. This makes co-funding for early childhood initiatives more difficult to secure. Advocacy efforts are needed to reverse this alarming trend. Secondly, while many of the largest partnership projects are national (single country), there has been a recent increase in large-scale regional or multi-country projects in the Step by Step network. Partly, this has developed as a result of countries becoming eligible to receive EU funding, as many EU partnership programs encourage multi-country initiatives. More recently UNICEF, the World Bank, and USAID have shown interest in regional initiatives. In this context, the strength of the ISSA network has been an asset.

Evaluating Quality and Assessing Impact

What is the real impact of the Step by Step Program? Like many large-scale programs implemented under pressure, Step by Step was not initially engaged deeply in evaluation. An early plan to collect data for a longitudinal study was dropped in the first year as Country Teams struggled under intense deadlines.

When Step by Step was reconceived as a five+ year initiative in 1998, the urgent need for evaluation re-emerged. With the support of USAID, the Step by Step Project embarked on a four-country independent evaluation, which demonstrated the impact of the program on children's democratic behaviors, ideas and values. This included: making choices, taking initiatives, valuing individual expression, and contributing as members of a

learning community. It provided the first evidence that Step by Step seems to provide greater support to children who enter with less-developed academic skills, illustrating that child-centered approaches enable teachers to respond to individual needs.

Research has also been used to advocate for children's rights. The Roma Special Schools Project challenged the placement of the inordinate number of Roma children assigned to remedial classrooms or "special schools" for the mentally handicapped in four countries. The project placed Roma teaching assistants in the classrooms who became an important bridge to the Roma community, and also provided intensive teacher training on anti-bias education, child-centered practices, and second language learning. The results of this pilot project were closely monitored by independent evaluators. After three years, the data demonstrated that 62 percent of the children deemed intellectually-challenged reached grade-level expectations. These results were presented to the Ministries of Education as a challenge to change the status quo of educating Roma children.

Evaluation has ensured the sustainability of Step by Step. External evaluations have been critical to the acceptance of Step by Step methods by education ministries. Within the OSI, evaluation has been used to defend funding for the program. In 2000, OSI commissioned a four-country study on NGO sustainability. The independent evaluators concluded that the new Step by Step NGOs have the capacity to continue all program activities in the future and are well-placed for long-term sustainability, despite the challenges posed by economic and political uncertainties.

2002

New Step by Step Countries

Program Development

New Initiatives:

- Reaching children with no access to preschool.
- School Improvement.
- Partnership with Council for Exceptional Children formalized.

Network Development

ISSA establishes office and staff in Budapest.

ISSA hires Executive Director who sets up office in Budapest.

Fourth annual ISSA conference is held in Vilnius, Lithuania — "Partnership with Families and Communities: Together is Better."

International Advisory Board established; meets in Prague.

Program Expansion

27 countries active in network.

20,849 kindergarten and primary classrooms in operation.

325 training centers in operation.

2003

New Step by Step Countries

Uzbekistan, Tajikistan

Program Development

USAID-funded PEAKS project begins in Central Asia.

ISSA's Reading Corner publishes 22 children's books in all languages of SbS network.

Network Development

First ISSA Teacher Certificates awarded for teachers who have passed ISSA Standards.

Fifth annual ISSA conference is held in Prague, Czech Republic — "Quality and Equality in Early Childhood Education."

Kyrgyzstan mentors Tajikistan and Kazakhstan mentors Uzbekistan.

Program Expansion

29 countries active in network.

22,648 kindergarten and primary classrooms in operation.

316 training centers in operation.

OSI and ISSA recently initiated a large-scale, two-year project to document and analyze the experiences of the past decade.

Building on the tenth anniversary celebrations in 2004, the collective Case Study Project will contribute the knowledge gained through the Step by Step Program to the early childhood development field, representing its diverse, complex, and rich experience. Through the project, professionals in project countries are provided with an opportunity to develop and practice skills in hitherto unfamiliar case study approaches. This qualitative research method complements the program's developmental philosophy, emphasizing the uniqueness of every individual, classroom, school, community, and country. The Case Study Project provides country case study teams with opportunities for multiple learning experiences and ongoing mentoring. It is expected that each of the 30 participating countries will contribute a case study to the collection.

The outcome on children is, perhaps, hardest to measure. National studies consistently show children in Step by Step reaching or exceeding national average test scores in academic subjects. Critically, several studies have shown that the programs promote social and emotional development. Children in Step by Step score higher on tests measuring cooperation, leadership, self-esteem, problem solving, and perseverance. Step by Step is gathering these studies to undertake a meta-analysis of children's outcomes and answer the most basic question: has the program been successful at improving the lives of young children and families in the region?



Before (above) and after (below) implementation of the Step by Step Program



The Next Ten Years

Step by Step has grown exponentially into an extended initiative providing continuity and comprehensive educational approaches for children up to the age of ten. Placing emphasis on the development of human capacity, we have learned that people are everything. Step by Step has held over 48 international or regional training events in Central and Eastern Europe, 10 training courses in the United States, and 5 international conferences. This process of knowledge transfer has been repeated

within each country, through training, mentoring, development, and distribution of hundreds of professional resources. The new emphasis on teacher standards has sharpened human capacity growth. Participants live the motto of “life-long learning,” seeking answers to program challenges through ongoing professional development.

ISSA's vision of “an open society where the entire community helps each child to reach his or her full potential” is achievable only if Step by Step forms new partnerships to advocate for universal services for young children. In Central and Eastern Europe, where Roma children lack academic and social preparation for primary school, attempts are being made to ensure two full years of preschool for each child. In countries to the east and south where fewer than 20 percent of children attend preschool, new partnerships are needed to provide communities with the authority and opportunity to reallocate funding for early childhood and increase access to a greater variety of services such as parent education, home-based early learning, and community centers. As ISSA engages in early childhood initiatives in new countries and regions, the ability to offer more flexible (non-center-based) programming and adaptations for cultural contexts is essential.

Changing attitudes takes time, effort, support, and commitment. Securing this commitment from election-minded politicians seeking quick results is, perhaps, the most daunting task for child educators, caregivers, and advocates. For Step by Step, the future will depend on its ability to mobilize support for early childhood internationally, using the extensive social capital that the program has acquired in national NGOs, and col-

lectively through ISSA. To do this effectively, ISSA and its members need to gain more capacity in research, evaluation, and advocacy. We will vocalize the collective power of our international network, approaching future challenges “step by step” with the enthusiasm and effort that has been the continuing strength of the program.

* The author gratefully acknowledges the expert assistance of Rachel Holmes in revising and condensing this article from a longer manuscript.

¹ The Open Society Institute is a private, grant-making foundation based in New York City, created in 1993 by George Soros to support his foundations in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. These foundations were established, starting in 1984, to help former communist countries in their transition to democracy.

² Throughout this article we refer to Step by Step Country Teams. To implement Step by Step, each participating country designates a Country Team, comprised of a Country Director, several Master Teacher Trainers, and support staff.

³Albania, Belarus, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Ukraine, Yugoslavia

⁴Enterprise preschools formed a significant percentage of preschools in the countries of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

⁵An independent governance structure placed the country program staff with the majority vote on the new Board of Directors.

2004

New Step by Step Countries

Argentina

Program Development

Case Study Project: A 10 year retrospective.

Network Development

We Celebrate 10 unbelievable years together!!!!

Haiti provides training in Argentina, and SbS arrives on a new continent!

Sixth annual ISSA conference is held in Budapest, Hungary — “Stepping into the Future: 10th Anniversary of the SbS Program.”

Program Expansion

30 countries active in network.

24,172 kindergarten and primary classrooms in operation.

328 training centers in operation.